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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 001940

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)  
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S TRIP TO MARACAIBO

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ABELARDO A. ARIAS FOR REASONS 1.4 (d  
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SUMMARY  
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1. (C) On June 5, the Ambassador traveled to Maracaibo, Zulia State, where Esteban Pineda, editor of the Maracaibo daily Panorama, told him that the pro-Chavez gubernatorial candidate suffers from incredibly low support ratings and has few prospects in Zulia's upcoming elections. At a lunch hosted by the Governor of Zulia, Manuel Rosales, invitees voiced concern over the date of the recall referendum and asserted that holding the referendum on August 15 could lead to delays beyond August 19 deadline. When interviewed by a Panorama journalist, the Ambassador emphasized that the U.S. will only respect the results of the recall referendum if there is a clean and transparent electoral process.  
End Summary.

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PINEDA'S OBSERVATIONS  
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2. (C) On June 5, the Ambassador traveled to Maracaibo, Zulia State, where he met with Esteban Pineda, editor of the pro-Chavez Maracaibo daily, Panorama. Speaking on his business interests, Pineda reflected that he has established working relationships with Zulia Governor Manuel Rosales and the GoV, and that what is most important is not allowing continued political polarization to affect the business climate. The Ambassador and Pineda also discussed the pro-Chavez gubernatorial candidate for Zulia, retired National Guard General Alberto Gutierrez. Pineda remarked that Gutierrez suffers from low support ratings and has few prospects in upcoming elections. (The Ambassador had a meeting scheduled with Gutierrez, but Gutierrez canceled, saying he had been called to Caracas. In fact, he did not leave for Caracas until the following day.) Pineda is very proud that his varied business interests are doing well and that he has money invested in Venezuela, not abroad. He maintains good relations with both President Chavez and Gov. Rosales.

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PANORAMA INTERVIEW  
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3. (U) The Ambassador granted also gave an interview to a journalist from Panorama after meeting with Pineda. Asked about the recall referendum, the Ambassador remarked that the U.S. will only respect the results of the recall referendum if there is a clean and transparent electoral process. The Ambassador reiterated U.S. commitment to a peaceful, democratic, constitutional and electoral solution to the current political crisis in Venezuela. The Ambassador also expressed hope that the recall referendum would lead to an improvement in bilateral relations between the U.S. and Venezuela, and that commented that cooperation on more technical issues such as immigration and trade could serve as a first step toward reconciliation.

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CONCERNS OVER THE REFERENDUM  
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4. (SBU) The Ambassador attended a lunch hosted by the Governor of Zulia Manuel Rosales (opposition -- Nuevo Tiempo party). The recall referendum and the reparos process were central topics of conversation. Concern was voiced over the as yet undefined date of the recall referendum. Holding the referendum on August 15 as the GoV proposes, they said, could lead to delays beyond August 19. Those in attendance were also apprehensive about the potential for political violence during and after the recall referendum. This anxiety stems in part from the March 6 murder of a local Accion Democratica leader, Evangelina Carrizo, in Machiques, Zulia State. Alfonso Marquez, Mayor of Machiques, commented that the most unsettling aspect of the Carrizo murder is that the GoV has

demonstrated no intention to prosecute the case although the alleged murderer has been identified.

15. (SBU) The lunch guests discussed the field of candidates for Zulia's upcoming gubernatorial election. As stated by Pineda, they too maintained that pro-Chavez candidate Gen. Gutierrez only had a public opinion rating between 22% and

25%. All thought that he would not pose a substantial threat to Governor Rosales. It was also noted that former governor of Zulia (and rival opposition candidate), Francisco Arias Cardenas had received less than 5% of the votes in public polling.

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COMMENT  
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16. (C) The key force in Zulia politics is Gov. Rosales. The state chapter of the Coordinadora Democratica is moribund. Rosales is the opposition. The state is heavily anti-Chavista and Venezuelans ratified more signatures in the appeals process than in any other state. Chavez regularly accuses Rosales of being both a golpista and a secessionist. Rumors abound that Rosales is one of the governors Chavez would like to have jailed.  
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